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DE RUEHLM #1019/01 3101237
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 061237Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0738
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2024
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9060
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7298
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5207
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3453
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5159
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0032
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0694
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4270
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9623
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6917
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0006
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3817
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001019

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/07/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: MUSLIM CONGRESS LEADER ON ELECTIONS, FONSEKA, AND
TAMILS

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Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION VALERIE C. FOWLER. REASONS: 1.4
(B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with PolOff, Chairman of Sri Lanka Muslim Council (SLMC) and Eastern Provincial opposition leader Basheer Segudawood spoke of his party's strategy to defeat President Rajapaksa at the upcoming elections. The strategy included forming a broad coalition with the UNP and other smaller minority parties and abolishing the Executive Presidency. In order to win, the coalition would need the support of Tamil diaspora representatives, both in working with local Tamils and with the Tamil diaspora community abroad. Segudawood noted the Tamil diaspora was hosting a conference in London November 12-13 to discuss the post-Prabhakaran future of Tamils. Many of the minority leaders were invited and were planning to attend. According to the SLMC leader a broad coalition of opposition politicians was planning to join the newly formed United National Front (UNF) for the election. Segudawood expressed tentative support for General Fonseka as a possible candidate of the coalition. END SUMMARY.

UNP-led Grand Coalition

12. (C) The SLMC Chairman discussed the signing of the MOU creating the United National Front by the United National Party (UNP), SLMC, Mangala Samaraweera's Sri Lanka Freedom Party Mahajana (SLFP-M), and Mano Ganeshan's Western People Front (WPF), as well as 19 other organizations and political parties. Segudawood pointed out that minority parties such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), People Liberation Organization of Thamileelam (PlOTE), Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), WPF, SLMC and the Upcountry People's Front were now willing to work together with this grand coalition. One of the pledges of the coalition, developed in part to bring these parties to common ground, would be to abolish the

Executive Presidency and return the country to a parliamentary system of government. UNP and SLFP (M) had already made public statements on the issue. While the SLMC had been publicly silent on its support for the coalition, Segudawood stressed that the SLMC would back the coalition to defeat the president. The chairman underscored UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe's popularity with minorities but echoed the sentiment, expressed privately by many political observers in Colombo, of Wickremesinghe not being the ideal candidate to beat the president. Segudawood said he was disappointed at some of the public actions, press releases, and agendas of individual opposition and minority parties, which he believed had been counterproductive to building an anti-Rajapaksa coalition, and stressed the need for one voice amongst the parties allied against the president.

General Fonseka: Coalition Leader?

13. (C) The SLMC chairman indicated there had been back channel talks by opposition party operatives with Fonseka about his role as a possible coalition leader. He remarked that while Fonseka's Sinhalese nationalistic ideology might be similar to that of the Rajapaksas, Fonseka came from a family that was born-and-bred UNP and would be the only one capable of beating the current government. For Fonseka to be a viable candidate in the eyes of the minority and opposition, however, he first would have to sign an agreement to abolish the Executive Presidency within 90 days of the elections. Fonseka had yet to make a decision on whether he would run, or with which party or group of parties he might ally himself. According to Segudawood, Fonseka would want two issues clarified before considering the coalition offer:

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his future after the Presidency was dissolved, and concerns for his personal security, implying that the Rajapaksas might stop at nothing to prevent him running against them. Segudawood pointed out that UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe personally promised Fonseka that the people would protect him. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was also putting forth a bill to Parliament that guaranteed former commanders and senior officers, personal security.

Tamil Future in the Hands of the Diaspora

14. (C) Segudawood claimed the Tamil Diaspora would be a key player in the upcoming elections. He noted that the Tamil Diaspora was hosting a conference on November 12-13 in London, which 20 Sri Lankan-based minority leaders were planning to attend. Among the possible attendees were Sivanesthurai Chandrakanthan a.k.a. Pilliyan (TMVP), Rauff Hakeem (SLMC), Sampanthan (TNA), and Mano Ganesan (TNA). (NOTE: Embassy is seeking a meeting with TNA leader Sampanthan before he travels to London. END NOTE.) The chairman described the diaspora as being divided into three to four groups but that it generally fell in two categories similar to the Tamil community in Sri Lanka: those who supported the LTTE and those who opposed it. Segudawood believed the challenge for the coalition lay in bringing the Tamil diaspora, the resident Tamil community, and the other minority leaders together to win the elections. The influence of the Tamil diaspora would have a critical impact in this regard.

Presidential Election Strategy

15. (C) Segudawood discussed a strategy he believed might pull votes from the president's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). He hinted that perhaps two or more UPFA officials were already prepared to switch allegiance to the new coalition. According to Segudawood, there were UPFA members who were very displeased with the Rajapaksa regime and ready to pull the plug on it. If the opposition were able to win

over at least two UPFA members, Segudawood believed others would be willing to do the same. The SLMC chairman remarked that the people were tired of hearing the president's propaganda of "winning the war" as his chief political accomplishment and centerpiece for the upcoming elections. Given the current government's unpopularity with the Muslims and Tamils, in order for the president to win, Segudawood claimed that the president needed at least 75 percent of Sinhalese votes. He hoped with Fonseka as the coalition candidate, the coalition could cut substantially into the president's Sinhalese base. At the same time, he claimed the Tamil and Muslim minorities together comprised 1.5 million votes and noted that the coalition's success depended on them.

Comment

16. (C) Segudawood's comments indicate how complicated the election situation is even before the president announces whether a presidential elections will be held in the spring. (NOTE: the president is scheduled to announce his decision at the November 15 Congress of the SLFP. END NOTE.) The key complicating factor at this point is General Fonseka, who could split the Sinhalese vote and deprive the Rajapaksas of their key issue of winning the war. But Fonseka would be very hard for the Tamil community to support, however much they may dislike the Rajapaksas. TNA leader Sampanthan, for example, told us that he would support the Rajapaksas before Fonseka as the lesser of two evils. It is such complicating

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minority factors, as well as other big issues such as GSP-Plus and the U.S. Incidents Report that may be giving the president pause in deciding whether to call early presidential elections. Some keen observers are starting to believe that the president may wait another two years for the next regularly schedule polls. By then, presumably, the political storms over GSP-Plus and the Incidents Report will likely have passed in one way or another, General Fonseka may have faded from the scene, and the international economic situation will likely have improved with a potentially positive impact on the Sri Lankan economy. The political landscape, therefore, would be very different from the increasingly rocky one the president now faces.

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